

### Altered By An Altar 3

We continue our series Altered By An Altar. We've been talking about various kinds of altars, from the ancient altars where sacrifices were made as burnt offerings, to the mourner's benches, the altars where we offer ourselves to the Lord in repentance and as a living sacrifice, to the table of the Lord where the Eucharist or communion is offered. They all carry this idea of sacrifice. They are all places of encounter, places of worship and remembrance and mercy. Remember the Hebrew word for altar means "slaughter site." This morning we are going to celebrate communion at the close so in some sense we are focusing on this kind of altar, a place where we encounter the saving mercy and presence of God through Jesus' sacrifice.

Turn in your bible to 1 Kings 1. I want to show you a unique use of the altar and as you turn there, I want to give you some background. Remember when God told the people to build an altar he told them it was to be built with horns on each corner. **(Picture of altar with horns.)** Horns in the bible were symbols of power, strength. When you think of the horns of a bull or another animal, you see where the idea comes from. As a picture of strength then, the bible speaks of God as the horn of my salvation. **"The Lord is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer...He is my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold."** Psalm 18:2 The Lord is the strong source of our salvation. In the New Testament, Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist refers to Jesus when he proclaims **"Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel because he has come and has redeemed his people. He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David as he said through his holy prophets of long ago..."** Luke 1:68-69 God in the O.T. and Jesus in the N.T. are referred to as "the horn of salvation."

The idea then is the horn is a symbol of strength and power and might. Specifically, the horns of the altar, at the corners, carry the idea of the strength and might of God to save. In the act of sacrifice blood was not only poured out at the base of the altar, but blood was dabbed on the horns of the altar to purify and make atonement for sin. The horns of the altar, sanctified by the blood of the sacrifice, are another image testifying of the power of God to save us. Regardless of how sinful, how wicked, how egregious our sins or our past, his blood, his mercy is more powerful!

In the Old Testament God arranged five cities of refuge where fugitives could flee to seek asylum and safety. The Lord told the people in Exodus 21 that if they accidentally killed someone, they could flee to a sanctuary city, to a place where they would be safe from the

vengeance of family until the matter could be settled. Over time it became accepted that one could run to the altar of God if you had sinned, because the altar was a place of mercy where you would be safe. While this idea is presented in Exodus, we really only have a couple of recorded incidents of anyone running to the altar for sanctuary and both happened in essentially the same story in 1 Kings.

At the beginning of 1 Kings we are coming to the end of the storied life of King David. The bible says he was old and well advanced in years. I think that's another way of saying old and he had a lot of mileage on his body - mileage beyond his chronological years. He had already declared Solomon was to be the successor to the throne, but his son Absalom tried to overthrow David at one point. Absalom was killed during the revolt and now, with David's health declining, another son, Adonijah (apparently the oldest surviving son of David), conspires to take the throne. He enlists the aid and support of Joab, one of David's military generals (the guy who had killed Absalom) and Abiathar the priest. These guys call all the royal officials together along with David's other sons and declare Adonijah to be king. Noticeably they didn't invite Solomon, nor did they invite Nathan the prophet or Zadok the priest or some other key members of David's staff they knew would remain loyal to David and to Solomon.

Word reaches Nathan the prophet that Adonijah has been made king without David's knowledge. Knowing that David had already sworn that Solomon was to be king after David, and believing that to be God's order and God's plan, Nathan goes to Solomon's mother, Bathsheba and tells her what's happened. Nathan devises a plan for how to confront David and get him to act on this. Look at 1 Kings 1:11-27.

David calls Bathsheba in and swears that Solomon will be king in his place. Then David calls Zadok the priest and Nathan the prophet and his military advisor General Benaiah and instructs them to take Solomon on the king's own mule down to the Gihon Spring and publicly anoint Solomon as king and blow the trumpet and shout "Long live King Solomon!"

When the sound of the shofar reaches Adonijah and his crowd and they get word that David has installed Solomon as King in his place, everyone panics. The political winds have shifted and everyone runs for cover. And Adonijah himself? The bible says, **"But Adonijah, in fear of Solomon, went and took hold of the horns of the altar. Then Solomon was told, 'Adonijah is afraid of King Solomon and is clinging to the horns of the altar.' He says, 'Let**

**Solomon swear to me today that he will not put his servant to death with the sword.” 1 Kings 1:50-51**

Adonijah runs to the safest places he can think of. He runs to the tent where the ark of the covenant is and where the brazen altar rests. He runs to the site of mercy! It's a good idea, but as we will see, his body was in the right place, but his heart wasn't!

Solomon tells him if he will show himself to be a worthy man and conduct himself appropriately, he will live but if he doesn't, he will be put to death. Adonijah comes down from the altar.

Adonijah holds to the horns of the altar but...he wasn't altered by the altar. He appealed to Solomon for mercy, for sanctuary, asking to be saved, but he had no intention of changing his schemes. Solomon sends Adonijah to his home where he lays low until David his father dies.

Some time after David dies, Adonijah goes to Bathsheba, Solomon's mom, and asks her to appeal to Solomon on his behalf, asking for permission to marry Abishag the Shunammite girl that had been caring for David. The bible tells us she and David had not been intimate, but she was considered a concubine, part of the king's harem. Quoting from The Communicator's Commentary, "By ancient custom, however, claiming the widow or the harem of a deceased king was an indirect way of claiming the right to the vacated throne." Asking to marry Abishag was just another scheme of Adonijah's. Solomon had been merciful to him and spared his life, but he sees thru this poorly veiled reach for power and now he has Adonijah executed.

Before David died he gave Solomon instruction on what to do with a couple of David's old advisors - men that had been with him from the beginning, but had turned against him. One of those was Joab. After David's death, Solomon gave orders to have Joab killed and the bible says, **"When the news reached Joab who had conspired with Adonijah though not with Absalom, he fled to the tent of the Lord and took hold of the horns of the altar." 1 Kings 2:28.** Joab tries the same thing as Adonijah, hoping for sanctuary and mercy. They tell Joab to come down from the altar but he says "No, I will die here." When they report this to Solomon he says, "Do as he says. Strike him down and bury him." So Joab was killed at the altar. Solomon deals with his father's old enemies and solidifies his control of the country.

With that back story, let me point out a couple of lessons we can learn. **Running to an altar is not enough. You must be altered by an altar.** It wasn't enough that Adonijah and Joab ran to the tent of the Lord and took hold of the horns of the altar. They needed to cry out to

God for mercy. They needed to encounter God there. They needed to have a change of heart. They needed to be altered at that altar.

Adonijah admitted to Bathsheba that Solomon had become king according to God's plan (2:15), but Adonijah refused to accept God's plan. He ran to the altar, but he never intended anything to change, he was only looking for mercy so he could regroup and try another way to steal the throne from Solomon. He was asking for mercy so he could live to sin again!

The point is, **Outward actions are not enough. There must be an inward change!** It's not enough to join a church, not enough to kneel at an altar. It's not enough to eat the bread and drink the cup of communion if there hasn't been a change of heart. Don't just go through the motions. Come to the altar and surrender your heart and life to the Lord, accept his sacrifice, the offering of his life and receive his forgiveness. Then and only then are you saved. Only then does the power of his mercy cleanse and save and deliver you from sin. It is there, not just holding to the horns of the altar, but holding to his saving mercy and grace through repentance and faith that you find sanctuary, asylum, refuge, salvation.

Communion doesn't save you. The bread and cup don't impart grace to you if you haven't repented and turned from your sin and come to Christ in repentance and faith. Baptism doesn't wash your sins away. Repentance and faith in Christ does that. Baptism and communion are outward signs of that inward work of grace. You are saved not by outward signs or works but by grace through faith.

Run to his altar in surrender, come in repentance, come in faith. Humble your heart and ask for salvation, ask for deliverance. Trust in his power to save and be transformed by his grace. Adonijah and Joab both ran to an altar but they weren't altered. In the end they found death and not life. Remember the horns of the altar are signs he has power to deliver and save from the guttermost to the uttermost, but you have to repent and receive his mercy and grace.

A second lesson: **Never let go of the cross and His saving power and grace.** Even though Joab wasn't sincere in repentance and he had no plans to change, I admire the determination revealed in his words. **“So Benaiah entered the tent of the Lord and said to Joab, ‘The king says, ‘Come out!’ But he answered, ‘No, I will die here.’” 1 Kings 2:30**

Again, Joab was unmoved and unaltered, but there is a lesson for us. First of all, Joab was right, an altar is the place where we die. But we die to our self, to our sin, to our choices, our will, our flesh, our way. We offer ourselves and our live to God as a living sacrifice. Lord

forgive me and save me and give me new life. Then we rise to walk in that new life, fully surrendered to him. We all need to be able to say to the Lord, “I will die here.”

The other lesson I learn from Joab’s resolve is this: Regardless of who calls you to leave the altar, regardless of what tugs at your heart or tries to pull you away, you need to decide you will never let go of the cross of Jesus, you will never stop trusting in his power to save, never stop relying upon Him and his mercy and grace. “Yes, but I’ve done some awful things in my life.” Yes, but in that spiritual sense you’ve grasped hold of the horns of the altar. In repentance you placed your trust in Jesus and in his power to save. You are trusting in the horn of his salvation, his strength and power and you have no cause for fear.

The great preacher Charles Spurgeon wrote, “There has not been through all these centuries a single example of a soul being cast away that came all guilty and hell-deserving and took Christ to be its salvation. If you perish, you will be the first who perished with his hand laid upon Christ. His love and power can never fail a sinner’s confidence. Therefore, may God the Holy Spirit lead you to resolve, “If I must die, I will die here.” Listen to me soul, whoever you may be out of this crowd, man or woman, whatever your life may have been, even though it should have been that of a prostitute or a thief, a drunkard or a profligate, if you will now believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, you shall be saved; for if not, then God himself will have missed his greatest intention. What did he give Jesus for except to save sinners? What did he lay sin upon Jesus for, except that he might take it off the sinner and let him go free, and be pardoned?”

Joab and Adonijah had this part right. What do you do when you’ve sinned, you’ve failed God, you’ve made a mess of things? **Run to His altar!** He alone has the power to save. Come to his altar and call on Jesus and trust in his saving mercy and grace. Here at the altar, the slaughter site, die to self and to sin and let Jesus’ cleanse you and forgive you and raise you up to a new life. Have the same resolve as Joab, “Here I will die. I will die to the old way of living and from now on I will live for Jesus. I won’t let go of him. I won’t let go of the altar, I won’t let go of the cross. I will cling to him, to his pardon, to his saving grace. If I perish, I will perish trusting in the blood and righteousness of Jesus Christ alone.”

There is a place of mercy. There is a place of sanctuary and asylum. There is a place where any and every sinner can run and find forgiveness and redemption. Run to the horns of altar. Run to his cross. Run to him and to his forgiveness, to the atoning mercy and blood of Christ. He is powerful to save, powerful to deliver, powerful to transform your life and give you

a new life and a new start. It's all found in Jesus and his mercy. Run to him. The bible declares, **“At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another. But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy...He saved us...so that having been justified by his grace we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.” Titus 3:3-7**

There is a place for you. There is salvation and redemption for you. “Come to the altar, the father’s arms are open wide. Forgiveness is bought with, the precious blood of Jesus Christ!”

You that are going to help us in serving communion if you will come.

We gather at the Lord’s table, the altar, remembering the cross, the slaughter site where his body and his blood were freely given for us as the atoning sacrifice. We gather at his table to receive the bread and the cup, this stark, living, physical remembrance of His body and blood offered for us. We hold to his grace. We hold to the bread and the cup. We hold to the cross and we won’t let go. We die here to self. We die here to sin and we receive his forgiveness, his life, his redemption, his mercy, his grace! At his altar, at his table we find sanctuary, asylum, forgiveness, peace.

Brothers and sisters, hear the good news. Upon no less authority than God’s holy word I assure you that those sins of which you have repented, they have been covered by the blood of Jesus. You have come to him in repentance and faith and he being faithful and just has forgiven your sins and cleansed you from all unrighteousness. You have been made clean! Hear and believe the good news of the gospel: In Christ you are forgiven and are free to love and serve the Lord and one another. “O what a Savior. Isn’t he wonderful. Sing Alleluia Christ is risen!” Cling to his cross and go rejoicing in his mercy, trusting in and relying upon his amazing grace!